The Builder.

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EARLY eighty plans for the drainage of this vast metropolis have been submitted for the consideration of the Sewers' Commission, and the extension of the time for receiving plans, will doubtless lead to an increase in the number. Many of these plans are quite worthless, and more of them are crude and ill-digested, the necessary consequence of the short time allowed for the preparation of them,—a circumstance which, as Mr. Bailey Denton urged in a letter to the commissioners, seeking the extension of the time afterwards given, amounted to "a positive exclusion of every person having a regard for his own reputation; for although the proposal which may ultimately be preferred, may involve but one main principle of design, such principle can only be mentally tested and matured by bringing to bear upon it every fact and contingency which locality and science may suggest to the originator of it. And will five weeks suffice for this?"

Well might Mr. Denton ask the question. If there were no other proof on record of the unfitness of the majority of the members of this commission for the position they occupy, this limitation would suffice. The subsequent extension of time, too, although sought by some who had found it impossible to submit a well-considered plan by the date named, was an injustice to those who had contrived to send in something. Further to illustrate the action of the Board of Sewers, we find that they are desirous of receiving proposals for a general system of sewerage, but that they refuse to have soundings executed. Now, such preliminary steps are to the full as necessary to ensure any thing like an approximation to an estimate of the cost of the works, as a correct map is to ascertain the best direction to be given to them. The very great uncertainty which the geologists of the board confessed that they felt as to the nature of the soil to be worked upon, would alone be a convincing proof of the necessity of such researches. As the commissioners would have the benefit of them, they surely ought to pay for them, and to furnish copies of the results to the different engineers they might invite to furnish competition plans for the works. To make definite plans in ignorance of the ground to be worked upon, would be merely a waste of time.

And here we would, on the other hand, briefly (and in a parenthesis) caution some who are connected with the commission not to affect to despise theoretical knowledge because they themselves only possess experience.

Theory and practice should go together. He who trusts to the one without the other, is very likely to meet with a combination of circumstances which will leave him sadly at a loss.

The discussions which have recently taken place at the meetings of the commission illustrate the necessity which exists for organising, in a more scientific manner, the execution of works of public utility in our country. We have, in this case, a board appointed by Government under a special Act of Parliament, with full powers to act, and almost to legislate, yet it appears that, after eighteen months' existence, the real solution of the question of the effectual sewerage of London is as remote as ever. Small experiments have been tried; much talking has gone on amongst the amateur engineers; but as for the real good effected, it is indeed but small. Such a state of things could scarcely have arisen had the commission included some professional men. At any rate, the common sense of the public would not have been shocked by the publication of some of the absurdities contained in the reports of the meetings of the present board.

A correspondent writing to us from Paris on this subject observes:—"To a person accustomed to the contrary abuse of scientific discussion which prevails in France, there is something painfully ludicrous in the reports of this commission's proceedings, which show amateurs enunciating statistical and engineering facts in the very teeth of common sense. The statements are repeated by the daily press; they set the ignorant agape; but foreigners ask themselves, with wonder, how so eminently practical a nation as ours can allow such nonsense to be published by official authorities. Why does not the profession endeavour to exonerate itself from the restraints and difficulties imposed upon it by the composition of the different public boards? In almost every country but our own these questions are left to the decision of men having the very highest education in the branches of service they are called upon to direct. How is it that we in England so long admit that a man can become competent to decide engineering questions by the study of law, or of physic? Yet such is the system we adopt throughout our public administration. When we name a Lord of the Admiralty, we take a man who is fit to be a political economist; we make noblemen or lawyers secretaries at war, who never carried a sword; and we take barristers, gentlemen, and doctors to make our commissioners of sewers. 'Ils avaient besoin d'un mathématicien, et ils ont pris un maître de danse,' said Beaumarchais: truly in England the same rule appears to prevail."

To the composition of the commission we objected when it was first made known, and still more so to the principle laid down by those who nominated the members of it, that *because* a man was an architect or engineer (and therefore might be supposed to know *something*, at all events, of the matters requiring consideration), he was not fit to be a Commissioner of Sewers. Tell us that such an architect or engineer is unscientific, is not intelligent, has prejudices and narrow views, and therefore will not make a good Commissioner of Sewers, and we can understand and admit the force of the objection. But when it is said that an enlightened, liberal-minded, scientific man, with business-habits, acquainted with construction, accustomed to the direction of such works as are likely to be required, is not a proper person, simply *because* he is an architect or engineer,—common sense revolts, and we unequivocally pronounce it one of the most preposterous assertions ever hazarded.

It was set forth in respect to drainage works in the report of the Metropolitan Sanitary Commissioners, and it is repeated in the "Report by the General Board of Health," * just now issued, that "the more the investigation advances, the more it is apparent that the progressive improvement and proper execution of this class of public works, together with the appliances of hydraulic engineering, cannot be reasonably expected to be dealt with incidentally or collaterally to ordinary occupations, or even to connected professional pursuits, but requires a degree of special study, which not only places them beyond the sphere of the discussion of popular administrative bodies, but beyond that of ordinary professional engineering and architectural practice. In justification of this conclusion, and to show the evil of the perverted application of names of high general professional authority, we might adduce examples of the most defective works which have received their sanction. All the improvements which the public have yet obtained in this branch of public works have been the result of the special and undivided practical attention of well qualified paid officers, and it appears to us that further improvement must be sought by the same means, and that one of the chief objects of future administrative arrangements must be to secure, protect, and encourage the zealous undivided attention and efficient labour of such officers."

Suppose we admit all this, surely the men of "connected professional pursuits" will be better able to judge of and discriminate the schemes of the "well-qualified paid officers" than those who know nothing of the matter. And what is the position of the present board? As a body (of course there are exceptions), they are ignorant of the matter in hand, and evidently—avowedly, indeed, by acts—have no reliance on the "qualified paid officers,"—one of whom, the chief surveyor, warns them against attempting to execute works proposed by the consulting engineer, as "they are wholly impracticable, and unworthy the object which should be kept in view for the perfect drainage of this great metropolis;" and says, as to the commission itself, that it is time for him "to speak out," in order that it may not bring itself "into ridicule, and destroy public confidence;" while another, the consulting engineer, says of a plan proposed by the surveyor, that it "would serve only to retard rather than to advance the general improvement," and that "it would be difficult to believe that any one holding the appointment of chief surveyor to the Metropolitan Commission of Sewers had really been serious in laying it before the court!"

The expenditure under some heads has been enormous, and demands immediate and rigid scrutiny. The "flushing" inquiry will probably lead to this; and if, as Sir John Burgoyne said in his letter to Mr. Bullar on the subject, "the *startling results* stated by the requisitionists prove, on inquiry, to be correct," an immediate remedy must be found.

The cost of flushing the Holborn and Finsbury sewers, under Mr. Roe, according to Mr. Leslie, was 3*s.* 3*d.* per mile per week; the money expended, according to the same authority, in flushing the Surrey and Kent sewers, amounts to 10*l.* 6*s.* 4*d.* per mile per week, and, in the gross, to a sum which is positively astounding! If this be correct, and it is seen that actually *thousands* of pounds have thus been got rid of, under the exclusive control, too, of one of the assistant-surveyors, and in a manner which seems to admit of little check, the necessity of the inquiry will be pretty evident. The useful result of the flushing is a *further* question.

To get perfect drainage (to lessen pain and

* "Report of the General Board of Health, on the Measures adopted for the Execution of the Nuisances Removal and Diseases Prevention Act, and the Public Health Act, up to July, 1849." Clowes and Son, London.

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